

Academic Drift in Brazilian Education¹

Simon Schwartzman

Instituto de Estudos do Trabalho e Sociedade

simon@iets.org.br

As an expert on international higher education, Philip Altbach has a strong sense about how the higher education landscape is changing everywhere, in terms of the way the institutions are supported, the kinds of students they get, the contents of education being provided, the working conditions of the academic profession and, more deeply, of the academic and professional culture and values that prevail within the institutions. In the introductory chapter to *The Changing Academic Workplace – Comparative Perspectives*, Altbach writes: “change is taking place, but from the perspective of the academic profession it is almost entirely negative – deterioration of salaries and working conditions, increased bureaucratization, and decreased professional autonomy. Academics worldwide, when asked how they feel about their work, are pessimistic”. He recognizes that “it may well be that changing circumstances – including the growing importance of accountability and assessment – are a necessary concomitant to academic institutions that can effectively serve a diversified and mass academic system”, but finds that it is a paradox that, “at a the time when there is universal agreement concerning the importance of higher education for the future of knowledge-based societies, the academic profession finds itself in a beleaguered state” (Altbach 2000, p. 24).

These changes in the working conditions and moods of academics is just one aspect of a much broader process of institutional differentiation in higher systems that include both universities that retain the main features of the idealized Humboldtian model (academic freedom, commitment to research, emphasis on merit, self regulation), in one extreme, and teaching only, low-cost, for profit institutions providing standardized courses and academic certifications at the other, with very different kinds of arrangements in between. There are many good reasons for this

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differentiation, including the variety of students (in terms of their age, previous education, income levels and need to work, as well as ethnic, linguistic and religious particularities in many places) and the different education providers that have grown to respond to these students - public and private institutions of all kinds, publicly supported or depending on the fees coming from students and the provision of services to survive. There is always a hierarchy of resources and prestige among these different institutions, often reinforced by the formal and informal rankings developed by governments and private institutions, creating a pressure on those at the bottom to emulate the institutional and academic models of those at the top, while, at the same time, they tend to move further and further apart in terms of their different clienteles and sources of support.

Academic Drift, Differentiation, and Positional Goods in Education

The term *academic drift* is used in scholarly literature about higher education to describe the tendency of educational institutions to raise their status by imitating the curricula and organizational models of their more prestigious counterparts, thereby pressing to reduce diversity within educational systems. The expression “mission drift” is also used in the same sense, and there is a growing literature dealing with this situation of growing differentiation and a longing for similarity and homogeneity. (Clark 1978; Dill and Teixeira 2000; Huisman 2000; Kogan 1997; Neave 2000; Neave 1979; Rhoades 1990).

There are good reasons to consider this diversity as an asset, rather than as a necessary evil, as explained by Van Vught (Van Vught, 2008). First, differentiated educational systems offer better access to education for students with different personal histories and types of academic training, and offer realistic opportunities for success for most of them. Second, diversified systems favor socioeconomic mobility by offering a number of alternatives for entry and transfer in education programs; this creates a broader range of opportunities and allows for more flexible patterns of study. Third, diversified systems respond better to the needs of the labor market, producing human capital with a number of different skill sets. Fourth, this diversity meets the need for social recognition of social groups that would be excluded by unified academic systems bound to the academic and achievement patterns of the most educated sectors of society (which also tend to be the wealthiest). Fifth, differentiated systems allow for the combination of elite education and education with a broader mission, offering education services to a heterogeneous public and responding to the multiple demands of the labor market. Without differentiation,

unified systems end up having to reduce their quality standards when they offer education at a mass level, which prevents the development and maintenance of institutions of excellence. Sixth, differentiated systems are more efficient, because the objectives of each institution or sector are more closely tailored to the needs of their students. Finally, diversified systems offer more opportunities for experimenting and innovating, which can take place in specific institutions or sectors requiring major changes to the system as a whole.

If there are truly so many benefits to differentiation, how to explain the academic drift that leads educational systems to uniformity? Part of the explanation has to do with the fact that the value of education does not depend solely on what it produces in terms of knowledge and qualifications, which are recognized by individuals and by the labor market as goods in and of themselves; it also depends on people's relative position on a scale of prestige and reputation. This scale is maintained and fostered by people and institutions that hold the highest positions within them — positions that everyone else tries to emulate.

The assertion that education is a “positional” good, generally attributed to a 1977 text by Fred Hirsch (Hirsch 1977), is a counterpoint to the theories of human capital that predominate in the economic literature on education.² For Hirsch, education has both an absolute dimension, the human capital — whose value increases with good students, good teachers, good facilities, and so on—and a relative dimension, whose value depends of place a person holds in relation to the others in the education ladder. This relative dimension means that education equality is, by definition, an illusion. The same goes for the labor market, in which people's opportunities for quality jobs increase when their skill levels are raised, but distributes the people looking for work along a hierarchy of jobs, with different working conditions, salaries, and social positions. The absolute dimension refers to the performance requirements of individuals, organizations, and societies, and is expressed in the ways through which schools, businesses, and government seek to fulfill their objectives by improving teaching quality, productivity, and developing the economy. The relative, or positional dimension, on the other hand, has to do with how individuals, universities and companies place themselves within an implicit or explicit hierarchy of prestige, seeking to maximize their reputation, a good that is inherently scarce in this kind of competitive environment. Institutions that succeed are able to recruit the best students, place them in the best positions within the labor market and attract more public and private investment. This trend for talent and resources to be concentrated

² The following is based on Brown 2003.

at the top in scientific research was called “The Matthew Effect” by Robert K. Merton in 1968, whereby “giving to he who has will lead to him having it in abundance; but giving to he who does not have, will lead to him ending up with even less.” The same effect can be observed in education, particularly in higher education (Merton 1968).

The main thesis is that the absolute and relative dimensions of education can enter into tension with one another, producing high costs and inefficiencies, particularly when the positional dimension predominates. The dispute for positions of prestige can bring benefits when it acts as an incentive to compete for better quality and higher performance. However, it can also lead to great inefficiency when people become overqualified or have irrelevant qualifications, because they compare themselves to one another, with little awareness of the external demands of the labor market. Also, resources can become overly concentrated at the top of the hierarchy, and people can lose themselves in the process of competing for the highest positions, without looking for more realistic objectives that can be obtained with differentiated systems. In order to avoid the negative effects of academic drift, actors that do belong to the established academic hierarchies, but who are still interested in the different products and results of education, need to exercise their influence and open up spaces for alternatives.

Academic Drift and the Crisis of Quality in Education in Brazil³

Brazil’s case is peculiar both in the sense that public education started very late, and that, differently from most countries in Europe and also Latin America, it never established different educational paths in basic, secondary education and higher education. All students have to get the same primary degree at age 14, and need to get the same secondary school degree at 17. There is some room for vocational education at the secondary school level, but it does not lead to a full degree except when done in addition to the standard curriculum. The quality the school system is very uneven, many students come from families with no or very little previous formal education, and the consequence is that learning results are very low on average, and with adolescence large number of students drop out of school without completing their degree.

The most recent evaluations of the Brazilian education carried out by the Education Ministry (through the nationwide standardized test known as *Prova Brasil*)⁴ and the

³ This section is based, in part, on two previous articles (Schwartzman, 2010a, 2010c).

⁴ The Prova Brasil consists of tests of Portuguese language and Mathematics administered to fifth- and ninth graders in all public, urban schools above a certain size all over the country. It is carried out in conjunction with the Basic Education Evaluation System (known by its Portuguese acronym SAEB), a sample-based assessment given to students in the last year of high school. The results of

OECD through PISA, the Program for International Student Assessment, given to 15-year-old students in OECD and other countries (OECD 2009) show that less than 20% of Brazilian young people at age 15 obtain minimally acceptable skill levels in Language (measured through reading comprehension), and only 6% of them in Mathematics. Students reach high school with limitations and disadvantages related to their socioeconomic origins that have accumulate over the years. This is not peculiar to Brazil, but is worse than in most countries with similar levels of economic development. Summarizing the large amount of literature written about this issue, Flávio Cunha and James Heckman write that “any analysis of human development needs to consider three well-established observations about ability. The first is that ability makes all the difference. A large number of empirical studies show that cognitive ability is an important determinant of salary, education level, delinquency, and success in a number of aspects of economic and religious life [...]. The second observation, established more recently, is that abilities are multiple by nature. Non-cognitive abilities (perseverance, motivation, inter-temporal preferences, risk aversion, self-esteem, self-control, preference of leisure activities) have direct effects on salary (controlling for education level), the ability to stay in school, teen pregnancy, smoking, delinquency, performance in skills tests, and a number of other aspects of social and economic life [...]. The third observation is that the “nature versus nurture” dyad is obsolete. One’s genes and environment cannot be viewed in isolation from linear models that identify variances in each model” (Cunha and Heckman, 2007).

The evidence gathered by Cunha and Heckman about the importance of early childhood education has been cited in Brazil and used to justify the expansion of early childhood education that has taken place in recent years. Still, the evidence they present about what happens to the large number of young people who did not benefit from this expansion has not been taken into consideration. This evidence indicates, first off, that intellectual development—as measured in IQ tests that evaluate cognitive capacity—can be stimulated in children up until they reach ten years of age, but after that, this development ceases. Second, the evidence indicates that the later any work is done to compensate for deficits in initial formation, the more expensive and less effective that work will be. The third result shown by the evidence is that late intervention can offer important results if oriented towards non-cognitive abilities, but classroom remediation programs designed to combat early cognitive deficits have a poor track record.

Prova Brasil and SAEB are combined with student enrollment data to obtain the Basic Education Development Index (known by its Portuguese acronym IDEB).

This evidence calls into question the merits of uniform secondary school education in Brazil, as well as the existing compensatory education programs for youth and adults (known by their Portuguese acronym EJA) designed to help those who dropped out of school to acquire, in an accelerated fashion, the abilities and general knowledge generally taught at younger ages. These handicaps, which are strongly correlated to economic, familial, cultural, and ethnic variants, are a central issue in discussions of educational policy in the United States, where the major debate is whether to treat everyone as equals (and allowing existing differences to surface on their own) or to acknowledge differences and treat them as such (see for example, Coleman 1990; Gottfredson, 2005; Paige & Witty, 2010).

The way this issue should be addressed at the secondary level is well known, if far from simple to implement: a range of alternatives should be opened up to offer different courses so that students can find their own individual paths to education that suit both their acquired abilities and their own interests. This issue is less relevant in small, wealthy, and relatively homogeneous countries where practically all students receive good quality education from the onset and can reach secondary education with a broad-based, egalitarian education; but it is the rule in almost all other countries. In most of them, this differentiation is between a more academic and conventional secondary education, on one hand, and vocational education, on the other. In countries like Australia and Germany, for example, the majority of students follow the latter path.

The steps necessary to change this situation—which would not require any immediate expense—include ending the insistence upon the currently burdensome, uniform compulsory high school curriculum, allowing vocational education to develop independently, offering access to higher education when appropriate, and discontinuing the National Secondary School Examination (ENEM) , discussed below, in its current version, which has become a major point of access to higher education. This access should cease to depend on general qualifications, but rather on abilities that are specific to each type of formation, which can be assessed separately. As it becomes more widely available, higher education needs to diversify too, creating multiple paths to long-term or short-term formation, whether more academic or more vocational.

The insistence in Brazil on maintaining a secondary school system with so much ambition, dysfunction, and inefficiency is part of a more general vision that permeates all of the country's social policies, which assumes that everyone should have access to all desirable rights and benefits (in this case, those of academic education and its corresponding preparation for future university courses), even if in practice this means exclusion and restriction for the majority.

In the past, Brazilian legislation allowed for a variety of tracks within high school education—scientific and classical, which would offer preparation for academic careers in the natural sciences and or the humanities, and industrial, agricultural, commercial, and pedagogical education, among others, which would prepare students directly for the labor market. As time went on, these differences gradually died out, and the 1996 Education Law revoked them almost completely. Instead, this law created a long, detailed list of what all Brazilian students needed to study, from Portuguese and Mathematics to history, physics, chemistry, biology, physical education, and many others, some of which were introduced later by special legislation, including Philosophy, Sociology, the Arts, Music, Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous Culture, and the Rights of Children and Adolescents. Curricular content such as road safety education, the rights of the elderly, and the environment are also listed as obligatory, and there are several hundred other bills currently under discussion in Congress that propose other contents (Tupinambás, 2010) (curiously, there is no requirements for learning statistics nor Law). Today, the regular secondary school curriculum requires students to take about fourteen different subjects, which means close to 3,000 hours of study over a period of three years. The result is that, in most schools, subjects are taught in a flat, bureaucratic, and superficial way, without the possibility of actual educational depth. Given that it is impossible for students to take vocational courses in lieu of academic ones, and given that those who successfully complete the requirements of the academic course load are natural candidates for higher education anyway, it is no wonder that so few students follow such a path. According to the Education Ministry's 2009 Student Census, there were 9.8 million high school students throughout the country, but only 850,000 of them were taking regular technical courses—an extremely small proportion when compared to other countries.

Dysfunctional Aspects of the National Assessment of Secondary Education (ENEM)

This tendency towards uniformity is made all the more problematic by the National High School Exam (ENEM), which the federal government has sought to use as the main mechanism for access to higher education, also as a measurement of the quality of secondary education in the country and also as a criteria in affirmative action programs, combining goals which may be in conflict with each other (Oliveira 2010).

Created in the 1990s, the ENEM was initially conceived to measure the abilities of Brazilian students who finished high school through “one single, multidisciplinary exam, with a writing component and 63 objective questions based on a set of five skills and 21 abilities not be divided into disciplines, as are the majority of other exams” (Castro & Tiezzi, 2005). In 2009, the Education Ministry negotiated with the federal universities to try to make it into a university placement exam, and it became a true marathon, with 200 questions to be answered over the course of two days. The new ENEM seeks to evaluate students in four main areas of

ability (language, mathematics, natural sciences, and human sciences)⁵ without offering space for options, and it thus obliges students and high schools to cover the entire encyclopedic curriculum. Since it was created in such a hurried way, the ENEM has experienced serious implementation problems, and the content of the exams has also been criticized. Under pressure from the Education Ministry, most Brazilian Federal universities do admit students based in part on their performance on the ENEM, but the more prestigious universities, which offer their own exams, do not weigh the ENEM results very heavily.

A better alternative would be for high school students to have a larger number of educational options to choose from, from vocational and technical training to scientific or humanistic education, and thus be evaluated and certified in whichever professional or academic areas they choose. Higher education institutions, meanwhile, could take the results of these evaluations or certifications into account, as long as the quality of the certification agencies was certified as well. A broad, differentiated system of evaluation such as this one would not have to be administered by the Ministry of Education. The Ministry could limit itself to certifying the certification agencies, which could be private, as they are in many countries; or public, and administrated by state governments, professional associations, and/or educational companies. Exams like the American SAT could continue to be used in combination with other exams and certifications. A system such as this one would require a new vision for the nature and role of high school education in Brazilian society.

Academic Drift in Vocational Education

In the 1980s, the federal government created a series of Federal Professional and Technical Education Centers—about one per state—from older apprenticeship and trade schools. The idea was for these centers (known by their Portuguese acronym CEFETs) to offer technical and professional education to high school-age students. As federal entities, the CEFETs received substantially more financial and human resources than state and municipal schools. Admission to them was granted through selection exams, and they became a path for well qualified students to prestigious university courses in technical careers. With that, the CEFETs ceased to fulfill their initial function, which was to educate high school-age students in vocational skills and thus prepare them for the labor market. The federal government sought to reverse this situation in the 1990s, separating the technical and academic aspects of the CEFETs so that students could choose between them. The technical curriculum would not offer a path to higher education, and instead would be a platform for those who were seeking a more immediate insertion into the labor market. This policy met with strong resistance from students and teachers at the CEFETs, especially the latter, who aspired to a career that was just as prestigious as that of professors at federal universities. This policy was finally eliminated by the administration of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva: Law no. 11,892, which passed on December 30, 2008, consolidated close to 100 educational institutions of different levels to

⁵ <http://www.enem.inep.gov.br>.

create 38 Federal Institutes of Professional, Scientific, and Technological Education. According to the website of the Education Ministry, they are 38 federal institutes in all the states, offering an integrated high school curriculum, higher-level courses in technology, and bachelor's degrees (*licenciaturas*). For all intents and purposes, the new federal institutes are comparable to the federal universities, including the new jobs for rectors and administrators created for them. The difference is that they can also continue to offer high school-level technical courses as well as conventional technical education, as well as other kinds of training and professional certifications.

The creation of a series of institutions of higher education focused on short-term professional training, aimed at inserting people into the labor market as quickly as possible, would be an important step forward for Brazil, where most higher education careers last four years or more. Brazilian law allows for shorter courses—which it calls “technological courses”—but these are not often chosen, because they are considered less prestigious and less likely to lead to job placement. According to the higher education census of 2008, 5.155 million students were enrolled in higher education courses, of which only 412,000 were taking technological courses. Of those, 84% were enrolled in private institutions. Enrollment in such courses is on the rise, but the numbers are still very low. At the CEFETs, meanwhile, only 40,000 students were enrolled at the higher education level.

It is unlikely that the recently created Federal Institutes and similar institutions will substantially alter this situation. An earlier example at the University of São Paulo (USP) is an indication of what can happen. In 2004 the University established a satellite campus in a low-income area on the outskirts of São Paulo (“Zona Leste”), offering short-term vocational education unavailable at the main USP campus in Butantã. But some years after these courses were established, USP-Leste is begun to look more and more like the main campus of the USP, amidst pressure from students and professors seeking the same benefits of prestige and reputation offered by the traditional courses of study available in the university main campus. Meanwhile, the Paula Souza Center, which also belongs to São Paulo state, has had a much more promising experience in the area of technical and professional education. This indicates that it is not a good idea to try to bring courses requiring such different institutional cultures and requirements under the same roof.

Academic Drift in Higher Education

Brazilian higher education has expanded considerably over the past decade, with 6.148 million students currently enrolled, and 330,000 more enrolled in graduate studies, according to the 2009 National Household Sample Survey (PNAD). There is a simple explanation for this growth trend: the major advantages that students who obtain a higher education diploma have in the labor market—especially in the public sector.

In the private sector, the mean income of those who have completed a higher education course of study is 4.2 times higher than that of those who have not. In the public sector, the mean income of those who have completed a higher education course of study is 2.5 times higher than that of those who have not, because the public sector salaries for those without higher education diplomas are already relatively high.

The other advantage of having obtained a higher education diploma is that one's income level continues to rise throughout one's career; the incomes of those who only finish high school grow at a much smaller rate. This helps to explain why short-term higher education courses, which are known in Brazil as "sequential" or "technological" courses, practically never developed. The Luis Ingnacio Lula da Silva administration's educational policies (2003-2010) for higher education basically consisted of encouraging access to public universities through quota systems, whether via *Prouni*, the purchase of spaces in the private sector via tax exemptions; or via *Reuni*, a financial incentive for federal universities to open up more spaces; or via the creation of new federal universities outright. Between 2002 and 2008, according to data from the Education Ministry's higher education census, overall enrollment in higher education courses increased by 46%—a 57% increase in private institutions and a 21% increase in public institutions. These numbers make it clear the main reason for the recent growth in higher education was the response of the private sector to the growing demand, rather the policies of social inclusion of the national government.

The idea that quality higher education should take place in the context of a university, and be associated with research, is established in the Brazilian Constitution of 1988. The 1996 Education Law acknowledges that universities are only one part of a larger system of higher education, enjoying a type of autonomy unavailable to other types of institutions. It also stipulates that they must follow certain criteria for intellectual production, and have a sizeable proportion of full-time professors with doctorates. However, this law does not say what the specific functions and the desirable attributes the non-university institutions should have,

In practice, Brazilian higher education has already become increasingly differentiated—contrary to the single model ordained by the constitution—with a small number of institutions that function like conventional universities, and the majority of institutions (both public and private) dedicated almost exclusively to teaching. Today, the legislation acknowledges the existence of universities, institutes of higher education, and isolated educational centers, but this acknowledgment does not translate into differentiated curricula and quality assessment systems. Public institutions created in accordance by law are established as universities from the onset, while private institutions need to be approved as such by the Education Ministry—a process that can be easy or hard, depending on when it takes place. Whether an institution is a formal university or not says very little about the kind of work it does, and in fact, quality graduate

research and teaching take place in mostly in selected institutions in the Southeast areas of the country, in the states of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, Paraná and Santa Catarina.

This would not be a problem in and of itself—the massification of higher education and the expansion of private, business-oriented, or philanthropic higher education institutions led to major differences among institutions in all countries. The problem lies in the fact that despite this undeniable differentiation, it is not acknowledged or legitimated. This leads to a situation of academic drift with serious consequences for the country.

All the federal universities are considered equal in terms of the pay scale of professors—most of whom are career public functionaries with full-time, exclusive contracts, whether or not they do research or participate in academic extension activities that justify such contracts. This situation means that Brazilian public higher education is extremely expensive, in terms of cost per student. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the fact that by law, all public institutions have to be free of tuition. Meanwhile, the existence of a centralized assessment system based on the standards of public institutions prevents the differentiated treatment of the students who study in private institutions. These students tend to be older; they tend to work during the day, and most tend not to have received a quality high school education that would prepare them for more academically rigorous university courses.

Academic Drift at the Graduate Level

With close to 11.000 PhDs and 32.000 academic articles published every year in internationally indexed journals⁶, Brazil has the largest graduate education system in Latin America, and one of the largest in the developing world. Despite its many virtues, the system suffers from problems of academic drift that resemble those that exist at the secondary and higher education levels, which lead to a system largely closed in on itself, with PhDs that are tend to be hired by the very institutions that train them. This system also makes less than the desirable impact on technological development, knowledge transfers to the productive sector and, and contributions to the implementation of public policy (Schwartzman, 2008b). In most countries, master's programs are short and focused on the labor market; in Brazil, academic master's programs are the norm, which people study to become professors. While the number of scientific publications has increased in recent years, they tend to have a low impact as measured by the amount of times they are cited, and they are published more than anything so that they can count towards the evaluation of academics and graduate programs carried out by the Coordination of Higher Education Manpower Enhancement (CAPES), an agency within the Ministry of Education. The production of patents is very small, and activities of technical assistance and technology transfer are not

⁶ These and other indicators are available on the website of the Brazilian Ministry of Science and Technology (<http://www.mct.gov.br/>).

considered in these assessments.

Not a single Brazilian university can be found among the top 100 universities in the different international rankings (except the University of Sao Paulo, which appeared in the 61-70 group in reputation, but only in the 178th place in the overall ranking of the 2011-12 Times Higher Education assessment). There is no doubt that the absence of any Brazilian universities in the top hundred is indicative, at least in part, of the provincial nature of Brazilian higher and graduate education. Brazil's universities admit few foreign students and find it difficult to hire foreign professors, and this hinders the attraction of talented human capital. Following the logic of academic drift, one would expect that all the Brazilian universities would try to emulate the patterns and achievements of the most prestigious international institutions. But one of the consequences of the academic drift, as noted in the beginning, is the weight of uniformity and conformity, which limits the ability of the best institutions to reach for excellence.

Conclusion

The problems related to academic drift are only part of a broad, multifaceted array of issues in Brazilian education; still, academic drift strongly limits what can and should be done to improve education quality at all levels. Throughout the world, countries are looking for solutions that can help them to manage the massification of education at all levels, addressing matters such as the roles of academic formation and vocational training, remedial and continuing education, models of organization and differentiation of higher education, internationalization, the role of the state and the private sector in providing education, and the links between academic and technological research. In the area of higher education, European countries are currently working on a broad reform movement known as the Bologna Process,⁷ which seeks to establish internationally accepted quality measurements—allowing for the mobility of students and professionals—and create a more flexible system of study. This system would include an initial three-year course of general or vocational education, followed by a one- to two-year professional courses, and then a third level of advanced studies lasting three to four years. This would allow for the combination of general, vocational, professional, and high-level scientific and technical training.

Brazil may be an extreme case, but problems of academic drift appear everywhere, and are very difficult to confront, given the general perception, not least among higher education scholars, that all deviations of the golden standards of academic education are to be deplored. There are good reasons to think, however, that there is life, sometimes even more interesting, beyond the academic walls.

⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/doc1290_en.htm

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